

It is clear that government is about serving local communities. Both a Democracy and a Republic are suppose to meet the needs of the citizens who enter into a social contract with it. Citizens own the public lands, own the airwaves that the cable companies use, and own the government. It is criminal and undemocratic to take that ownership away from the citizens. On a practical level, deregulation of cable television has led to consumers have their rates jump an average of 59 percent -- with some areas experiencing even more dramatic increases. The cost of cable modem service remains out of reach for many households, holding constant for years and selectively underserving rural and low-income Americans. For low income citizens, this is disenfranchising. Leaving them out of the information loop; out of the Democracy (or even the Republic). The American people are watching the digital divide widen even as the need for access to high-speed networks increases.

The FCC, through this Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, recognizes that new video competition is entering the market, as phone companies (like AT&T and Verizon) begin to roll out television service. The Commission asks if the telephone companies are slowed or blocked in their expansion by the process of negotiating franchises -- the agreements that companies seeking to provide video services sign with local governments that set the terms for building cable television systems.

Does the franchising process need reform? It is unclear to me that it does without a real debate with the public/the citizens who own the airwaves. It seems to me that creating a process that is solely beneficial to the corporate and financial needs of the companies involved, is unfair to the public. It is criminal to treat the citizens this way and reflects the very real possibility that our Democracy is failing. The most important issue is how to ensure that the rights and services of local communities are protected and enriched. How do we meet the needs of rural communities; of poor people; of the basic middle class who is feeling the harsh economic realities of an ever globalizing world? We should start with a desired outcome that meets the needs of the citizens and not corporations and work backward to see if the process to deliver them can be improved. Local governments undoubtedly will -- and must -- play a key role in any future franchising process.

Though the franchising process has not been perfect, it has been a critical safeguard to protect the interests of consumers and citizens in our local

communities. Now that the phone companies are building television systems, local communities are hungry for new competition that could drive down costs, increase options, provide access to local content and bring us closer to bridging the digital divide.

These franchise agreements guarantee that local governments control rights-of-way and obtain fair rents from the companies that dig them up to lay cable. They guarantee universal build-out of the technology and its advantages to every household in the community, not just affluent neighborhoods. They guarantee funding and facilities to provide public access television as well as other services like low-cost broadband for our schools and libraries.

As new franchising rules are considered, a number of market realities must be taken into account. There is a distinct lack of independent programming, particularly local independent programming, on cable systems. This is largely the result of vertical and horizontal consolidation among the largest media companies and cable providers. We are required to buy channels we don't want or need because the cable operators bundle them together. The quality of customer service often reflects the fact that cable television is not a competitive market. The mere presence of satellite providers does not drive down rates nor present an affordable alternative for broadband access.

In many communities, the only truly independent sources of local news, information and culture come from the public channels produced at community media centers. They are the only way many citizens see local government in action and often the only way residents get information about events happening close to home. Some towns have been able to negotiate for funding to enhance and expand these resources. Others have obtained wired schools and libraries, resources for e-medicine, government efficiency programs and other educational initiatives. All use their negotiating power to ensure the entire community is served.

The risk of supplying "one size fits all" franchises to new providers is the elimination of these and other valuable services that fulfill important public policy aims. There is surely a need for new providers of broadband and video content to enter existing markets, be they private or public.

However, no matter the level at which 'franchises' to new providers are

granted -- local, state, or national -- local communities cannot be cut out of the process. They must be allowed to lend their voice to how new video and broadband systems will be implemented and what features will be available to meet future needs.

Please protect our rights as owners of the airwaves from the greedy corporations. Please keep public access public. It is a great place for youth to get a feel for how to create local programming. It is a great way for communities to stay connected to each other. Local is important!!! Local is very important. Dictating these things for local communities is undemocratic.